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ABSTRACT

Sex-related language stereotypes and sex-related differences in language usage are examined in this paper, and some recent research findings that illuminate them are reported. The following topics are among those discussed: seemingly universal characterizations of women's speech as gossip, nagging, or chatting, partially explained by most societies' more positive view of males than of females; sex-based differences in the semantic system of many languages, in terms of the lexical choices made by males and females; the way in which forms of address reflect the power and status of males and females; the way in which semantics and syntax sometimes conflict in languages' gender systems; and the use of so-called sex-neutral terms such as "man" and "mankind" to refer to both sexes. A study is then described in which subjects were asked to select male, female, or male and female referents for statements containing so-called sex-neutral terms; preliminary findings indicate that the concept of a consistently sex-neutral or inclusive term in English is not supportable, despite claims to the contrary, and that the term "man" in particular emerges as a sex-marked male referent rather than a neutral term. (GW)

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Sex Differences in Language:

A Cross-National Perspective with Emphasis on English

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> In Jutland they say, "The North Sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for words." The English are too quick to stereotype, with "Women's tongues are like lambs' tails - they are never still." But this idea is not merely the voice of Northern Europe. The Chinese mean virtually the same when they say, "The tongue is the sword of a woman, and she never lets it become rusty." Contrast these with sayings about both sexes: "Nothing is so unnatural," say the Scots, "as a talkative man and a quiet woman." Perhaps what they mean to say is the notion that the Spanish have articulated more clearly, "Men speak; women chat [hablar: platicar]."
>
> Swacker, 1975, 76

Or as I have ironically noted at least for United States mainstream culture, "Men discuss, women gossip.", "Men debate, women argue.", "Men disagree, women nag." Unfortunately, much of the United States press, in reporting on the United Nations sponsored International Woman's Year Meeting in Mexico City in 1975, gave just that impression - a meeting of a "bunch of bickering women," a "hen party" on an international scale - chatting, gossipping, arguing. This deeply affronts me as I was there and witnessed the enormous cooperation and movement toward a common goal

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by both female and male delegates who came from almost unbelievably different world views and cultures. Yet the United States press largely chose to report on the dissention, not at all unusual for United Nations meetings, by the way, which are often marked by members staging walk-outs, and also often chose to slant it in the direction of petty "card party" or garden club bickering.

I have often asked myself, as a sociolinguist, why the seemingly universal stereotypes about sex differences in language, including those above, have emerged in "the folk mind," as Swacker puts it (1975,76) - and not others such as women's language is more incisive and powerful than men's. Today, I'd like to try to at least illuminate the outlines of a possible answer to this widespread choice of characterizations based on research which has largely been only recently conducted. Interestingly enough, the explanations for the characterizations of sex difference in language, which are emerging from much descriptive research on the topic, are well known to both political scientists and sociologists - power and status differentials. In other words, we find much of the data from cross-cultural research on sex differences in language being explained by males' relatively higher status and by males' generally greater power in most cultures around the world. As Furfey put it some time ago, ". . . the distinctions in question [sex differences in language] are bound up with a masculine assertion of superiority." (1944,221) Therefore, one can find researchers stating something like, what men say is more serious, more weighty, and <u>how</u> they say it also become imbued with more positive connotations. In other words, what is said and how it is said is more positively viewed by most societies if a male rather than a female says it. But language behavior is even more

complex than these distinctions indicate, as we also research language used about males and females (referential language use) as well as language used by males and females and how both are judged by cultures and societies.

Put another way, research on sex differences in language has illuminated the following distinctions:

> Sex may affect linguistic forms [phonology, syntax and semantics] in three ways; for such forms may be modified by (1) the sex of the speaker, (2) the sex of the person spoken to, and (3) the sex, real or conventional, of the person or thing spoken of.
>
> Furfey, 1944,221

And we add distinctions about not only the forms of language used but also the patterns of use themselves - who says what to whom when and how - or what is not said, e.g., verbal taboos.

Turning to specific findings, research on sex differences in language has revealed sex-based differences in the semantic system of many languages, both in terms of the lexical choices males and females make as well as how males and females are referred to by their cultures. Differences in words used for the same object have been reported among the males and females of the Ignaciano Indians of Bolivia (Key, 1975) and the Gros Ventre in Montana (Flannery, 1946), to name only two cultures among many which have been studied. Such differences seem to serve notice, as it were, that there are culturally perceived differences between males and females; they signal separation of some sort. Among European cultures - German, Danish, French, Russian and English - the greater use of intensifiers as in "it's so lovely." [so, such, vastly], "C'est trés jolie," is reported in females' speech rather than males'. (DeStefano, 1976). Thus use of intensifiers not only signals a type of

separation but has also been explained to signal a need on the part of a female to make her language more powerful - more intense. [Incidentally, in most cases, so-called "exotic" cultures have been more widely studied by linguists than have major ones with the recent exception of the United States.]

In looking at the lexicon as a whole, or rather, at what areas of the lexicon are more developed in womens' speech and more in males' speech, Susan Harding (1975) reports that in the village of Oroel in northeastern Spain that women's "verbal specialities" center around home and family and a verbal finesse designed to penetrate the secrecy of men in their village which accompanies the greater power and resources available to them as males. Certainly one does not have far to go to be struck by examples of differences in lexicon for males and females in their own culture. It is the direction of those differences which is important when considering the impact of sex differences in language.

Within the semantic system of language, referential terminology has been more widely studied and probably gives us greater insight into differences in power and status between males and females. The entire area of address forms, widely researched by anthropologists and linguists, provides information as to how power and status are reflected in referential language. To summarize some cross-cultural data, findings indicate that in Iran, women play an inferior role in many aspects of life. 'Asi states:

> The everyday language does not fall behind the literature in this race. In many places, it is a dishonor to call one's wife by her own name. She is referred to as "the house" [manzel], "the mother of children," "the chastity," "the genitals," or simply as the oldest son's name. All these titles show very clearly the social image of a woman and her place in the society. (1971,18)

Bodine (1973,6) notes that in Bengali, there are a number of titles and terms of address for males but virtually none for women.

When looking over the variety of address forms world-wide, patterns of male dominance do emerge in the sense of greater status often ascribed them by the address form. In English, we mark a female in relation to a male, e.g. Miss is unmarried, Mrs. is married. I was recently told by a reliable source that men in the editorial room of the Columbus Dispatch (a daily newspaper in Columbus, Ohio) take Ms. (supposedly reciprocal with Mr.) to indicate a divorced woman. This is not reciprocal in that men are not addressed in terms of their relationship to women; Mr. has no denotations or connotations of that sort. Lack of reciprocity is a sign of differentials in status and power. Some linguists state that English thus clearly marks the ascription of status to women on the basis of their husband's status. While in Bengali, a woman could be considered to be so lacking in status, she doesn't even "need" any form of address acknowledging her individuality.

For a study of power and status, perhaps one of the most revealing areas of referential language use in the semantic system of a language is the so-called sex-neutral terms. In English, it is commonly asserted terms such as human being, person, individual, man, mankind, and the pronominals he, him, and his are sex-neutral referential terms. Questions arise partly because so many languages have a gender system; all Indo-European languages do, for example. In the gender system of a given language, sex in actuality and in the semantic system - male and female - may intersect with syntactic masculine, feminine and neuter gender. What fit do we find between sex and syntax? For example, we have in

English, pronoun agreement based on sex of the referent - boy - he; girl - she. On the other hand, professor in French has a masculine gender ending ending - professeur - even though women obviously can be and are professors. The inflectional ending -eur is not changed to refer to a woman professor. In Chinese, Hungarian or Aztec, females may be referred to as he and males as she in the gender system. Also in an American English variety called Black English, children will say such things as "He a nice little girl." Obviously, then, semantics and syntax may be at odds in the sense that syntactically a dog is masculine in German but may be female, or an angel is masculine in Spanish but may be used to refer to a female. This is not at all unusual in languages for syntax and semantics, form and meaning, not to be isomorphic.

Yet, in many cases, the syntactic gender system of a language is used to clearly express semantic sex. We often find it appearing in noun-pronoun agreement where we select he or she to agree with, in sex denotation, the sex of the referent of the noun - author, he or author, she. Mary Key (1975,93) gives the following anecdote: An Italian woman who spoke English fairly well consistently referred to the author of a book as he, although it was written by another Italian woman. [Italian also differentiates between he and she.] Later she explained, "Well, you just expect a scholar to be a man." She thus changed the pronoun to fit her idea of the appropriate sex of the referant.

Thus, an important question is how is language used to refer to both males and females? Are there terms which are sex-neutral, sex-unspecified, or inclusive of both? And in some cases, even more importantly, which syntactic gender is chosen to refer to both males and females if no neuter form exists when both are meant or thought to be included?

Do we find neutrality, inclusion of both, or do we find one sex subsumed under the other or consciously changed to another as in the Italian example? The answers to these questions can reveal a great deal about the relative power and status of males and females in a culture. In English, we have long been told that the pronominal forms he, him, and his are sex-neutral, inclusive of both males and females - are generic, to use a common term. On the face of it, it could be argued that females are thus subsumed under the category male, certainly a non-reciprocal relationship of status and power. Is that the case? Currently, I am conducting some research on this issue in English as has Wendy Martyna (1976). Unfortunately, I've not been able to uncover, other than sparse anecdotal information, much on this question in languages other than English and cultures other than United Stated mainstream culture. I hope that future research on sex differences in language will turn in this direction as we need cross-cultural data to confirm or disconfirm the validity of our findings to know if they are applicable to more than one culture and language or if they are perhaps peculiar to one or a few.

Briefly, in my study I investigated the frequent assertion that there are terms in English which consistently refer to both males and females such as man, mankind, individual, human being, person, and the pronominals he, him, and his, e.g. "true" sex-indefinite terms. Subjects were presented a series of statements, drawn from textbooks and other such sources, containing one of the above terms in each, then selected a referant by assigning each to one of seven charts displaying male and female figures in various combinations such as a single female, a group of females, a group of males and females, etc. The figures were based on the international symbols for male and female with no identifying

racial or personal characteristics.

Preliminary (and I stress preliminary) findings indicate that the concept of a consistently sex-neutral or inclusive term in English is not supportable, despite claims to the contrary. The referents chosen for the terms such as mankind, individual, he, etc., appear to be predominately a function of the context provided by the statement in which the term appears and of the age (10 years to 23 years of age) and sex of the subject. So the referents of person may be a mixed male-female choice, a single female, a single male, or a combination male/female figure (a psychologically neutral figure). Males tended to choose a single male figure as the referent for person except when the statement was about a person being overweight. Then both older males and females tended to choose a female referent, but not younger subjects. Older females tended to choose a female referent or the psychologically neutral referent more frequently than did males for person. For individual, males tended to choose a male or sex-neutral referent, while females chose the sex-neutral referent more frequently except when the statement involved an individual seeing "one side" to questions. Then females chose a male referent more frequently. For man, all ages and both sexes chose male referents far more frequently than female or even mixed, especially when the context was "Man has a basically violent nature." And man is supposedly one of the most important sex-indefinite terms in English, found in myriad titles and captions such as "Man and His World," "Early Man," etc. Another finding is that both sexes chose females referents relatively infrequently; these referents were the lowest choice of all.

Finally, in looking at he, Martyna (1976) reports she found, for English and for essentially the same cultural group I studied, that he was only one of the pronouns used to refer to, as she puts it, "a sex-unspecified other person."

> Our pronoun choice is influenced not only by the presumed sex of sentence subject, but by whether we are speaking or writing, and whether we are male or female. Our usage of the generic HE thus contrasts sharply with the grammatical standards we have been taught, and with the assertions about language usage which have been made by those who would retain the generic HE.
>
> 1976,14

Such a finding lends strength to the questioning of the supposedly generic use of he and him to refer to any group of males and females. Pepinsky (1977) raises this very issue in counseling psychology.

What seems to be emerging, among other findings, is a complicated picture of perceptions as to the referents of so-called sex-neutral terms in English. However, man clearly emerges in the study as a sex-marked male referent, not a neutral term. We could argue that when man is used, females are, in actuality, excluded from the referent. Since man is used so frequently in titles, captions, terms such as policeman, fireman, etc., this would seem to indicate that females, by their very exclusion, do not participate in the status and power accruing to the referent. However, in order to clarify the relationship of the use of such referential language and status and power in a society, much further research needs to be conducted. Yet, the evident exclusion of females as perceived both by middle class males and females appears to parallel what we know about sex-based power and status differentials in United States mainstream culture.

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